

From Rural Tourism to Sustainable Rural Tourism

History to Current Debates

EQUATIONS

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Rural Tourism is growing in terms of number of visitors and the Government of India focuses on it as an engine of growth. We believe that any rural tourism development plan needs to focus on sustainable development and take into account the priorities and needs of local people. This paper emphasizes the need for sustainable forms of tourism by outlining the possible socio-economic, cultural and environmental impacts of current forms of Rural Tourism. The paper first explores the meaning of terms such as Rural, Rurality and Rural Tourism. It focuses on the genesis and growth of Rural Tourism, Rural Tourism in India, impacts of Rural Tourism and the need for sustainable Rural Tourism.

"Riding on their imperial horses,
Flying like kings,
Thinking that they've understood everything.
Do they not realise that even birds fly?"
- Tashi Rabgyas, angered by tourists, 1980 (Hodge, 1991: 91)

Tashi Rabgyas, a resident of Ladakh, expressing his feelings on tourists that have invaded this small town of Ladakh, located in the northern most state of Jammu & Kashmir, India. This growing tension between the tourism industry and the local community in rural areas is becoming more apparent by the day. This paper tries to understand the meanings of terms such as rural, rural tourism in general with particular reference to India and traces the development of rural tourism from an historical perspective to the current debates.

Rural and Rurality

Defining rurality has taken much space in geographical and rural sociology texts but there is little consensus on what constitutes the phenomenon 'rural' (Robinson 1990; Ilbery 1997 in Thomson Learning). A simplistic definition of rurality can be those areas, which lie beyond major towns and cities and which are, therefore, rural, as opposed to urban, in character (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Lang (1994) suggests population density, size of settlement, land use and traditional social structures as main characteristics that help identify the area as rural. However there is no universal definition for 'rural' as national governments use country specific criteria. For example, rural in Australia is defined as parishes of less than 5000 people while in Denmark and Norway towns of fewer than 10,000 people are considered rural areas (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). In India, defining rural gets even more complicated as it is a state subject. However for a general understanding we could use the definition as illustrated in the Census of India (2001), rural location – is a location with a population of less than 10,000 persons. At the time of the Census, there were 638,000 villages in India.

Rural Tourism

Here again a universal definition has been hard to come by. In a broad sense it can be defined as 'a state of mind, and technically, according to activities, destinations and other measurable, tangible characteristics' (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Over time researchers have constantly added to understanding the activities that encompass rural tourism. The list includes interest in farms, nature, adventure, health, education, arts, and heritage (Bramwell and Lane in Jolliffe & MacDonald, 2003) and experiencing living history such as rural customs, folklore, local traditions, beliefs, and common heritage (Pedford in Jolliffe & MacDonald, 2003). The key parameters that define rural tourism are: 'it is located in rural areas, functionally rural; based on small-scale and traditional activities and enterprises (rural in scale), relies on the traditional qualities of the countryside, develops slowly under the control of local people and is non-uniform (reflecting the complexity of the rural environment) (Thomson Learning).

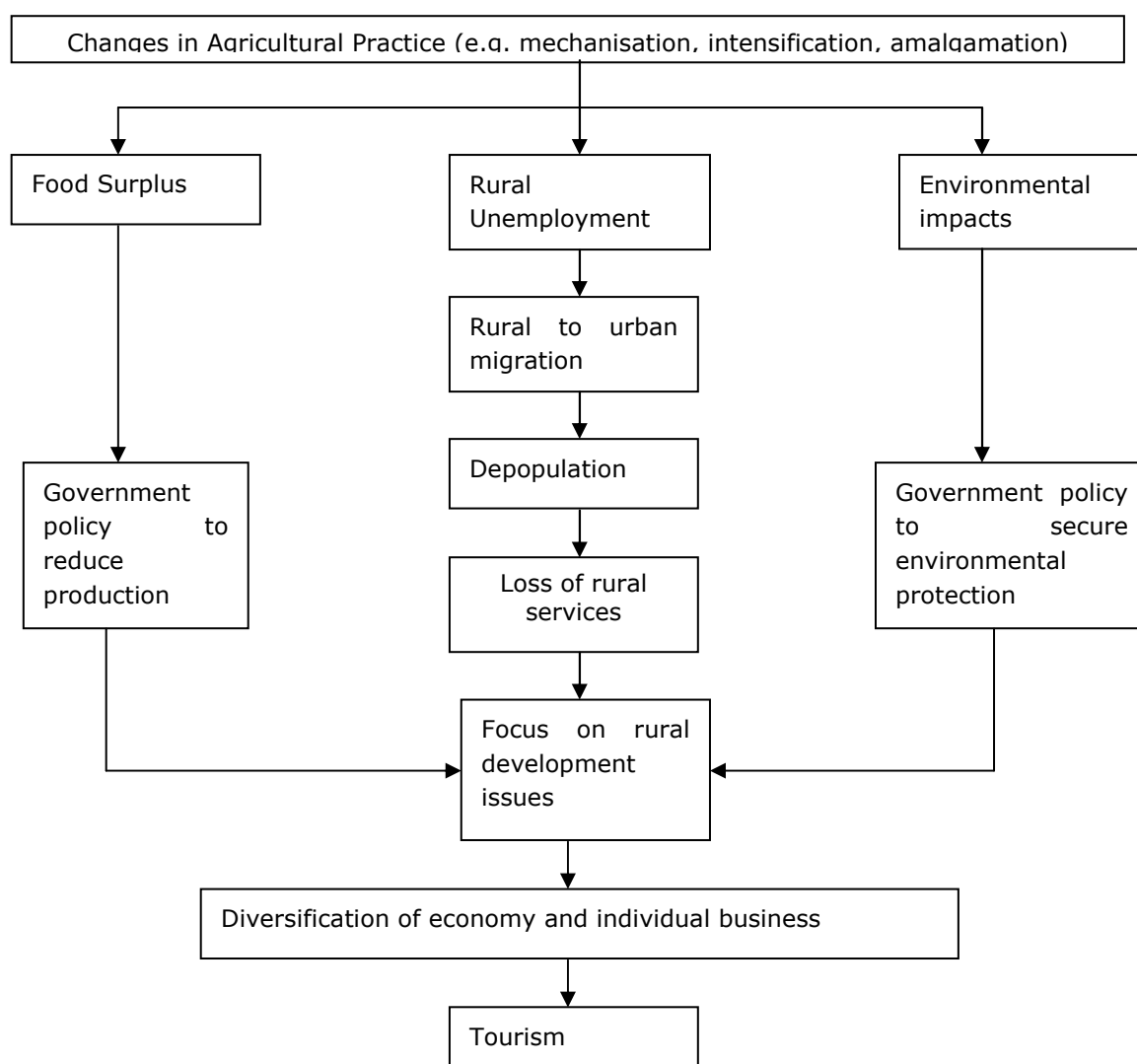
Genesis and Growth of Rural Tourism

Rural environments have a long history of extending themselves for recreational purposes. Historical data reflects the existence of countryside recreation in European countries right from the 17th and 18th century. Thomas Cook, the pioneer of tour packages conducted its first excursions to country areas (Williams, 1998). However before the 19th century few people other than the upper class travelled. This trend changed by the mid-19th century. Invention of the railways, availability of free time, increase in disposable income and other technological advancements (Sharpley &

Sharpley, 1997) all contributed to luring the middle class to experience holidays once considered the domain of the elite. The motivation for these early tourists were either the urge to experience the popular images that they had been subjected to or in some industrialised regions, the working population (ex-migrants) visiting their rural roots in the countryside. Hungary is a classic example of the latter (Rátz, & Puczkó, 1998). Until this point the region didn't feel the need to build on this segment, as the volume was small. However with the continuous increase in the number of tourists visiting rural areas, the awareness of developing the region to cater to the needs also grew. The sliding economies, changes in agricultural practices, the rural-urban migration initiated by the industrialisation, were also contributory factors for this shift (Figure 1). With the increase in popularity and numbers, the impacts of tourism on the environment and people started emerging. As early as the 20th century questions of access to and preservation of valued landscapes were becoming contentious issues.

From Figure.1 we can conclude that the development of rural tourism in a region was based on a two-pronged agenda: developmental benefits (job retention, creation of new jobs, farm support, infrastructural development) and the preservation & conservation of the environment (landscape and nature conservation). Apart from the developmental and environmental reasons, the social criteria (broadening of cultural provision, enrich and revive dying arts and craft forms and social interaction for local people who often live relatively isolated regions) (Swarbrooke, 1996 in Rátz, & Puczkó, 1998) are also motivational factors for the development of rural areas. It was based on one or more of the above factors, which has led many countries both developed and developing to focus on rural tourism.

Figure 1: The context of Rural Tourism



Source: Thomson Learning

So what is it that attracts the tourist to a rural area? Working from the perspective of the tourist, the countryside has been viewed upon as 'isolated and remote representing peace, difference, even exoticism. Rurality means nature - for

mental contemplation, aesthetic appreciation or physical activity. Traditional lifestyles represent our heritage and the security of past times (Brown & Hall, 2000). It is this culture and heritage that is often believed to be well preserved between generations in rural areas. Other words/ phrases that people associate with rural tourism is relaxing environment, adventure and challenge, health and fitness, fresh air, wildlife and landscapes, experience of rural communities, culture and lifestyles, a change from everyday urban life, conservation work and explore historic identities, interests in heritage (Thomson Learning). Rural tourism is one that extends to all senses. It touches on the physical and psychological level. Tom Stephenson sums up: 'were not to see landscape, so much as to experience it physically' (Cosgrove, 1984:268 in Urry, 2002:89)

Tourism in rural areas in the 21st century has built on the original concept with greater focus. Many countries in order to achieve a balanced growth of the urban-rural regions have incorporated the development of tourism. Very often rural tourism is a sub-component of the agricultural policy of the nation. The dynamics between the pull and push factors are becoming more complicated and sophisticated. The numbers of visitors to rural areas has increased considerably. It was estimated that during the turn of the century 3% of all international tourists travel was for rural purposes, which is around 19 millions (excluding domestic tourism). This accounts for an annual growth rate of around 6%, 2% above the growth rate for all tourism (Cabrin, 2002). The countryside is also increasingly being viewed as a commodity (Kneafsey, 2001) that can be marketed by the tourism industry and consumed by the tourist. With the rapid consumption rate, tourism has needed to develop in all types of countryside to insatiate this growing need. The new forms of rural tourism that are currently in use to describe the tourism activity are agri-tourism/ agro-tourism, farm tourism, green tourism, soft tourism, alternative tourism, eco-tourism and several others (Hall & Page, 2002:213).

The term 'rural tourism' has different meanings in different countries. A few examples of the forms it takes in different countries: In India, components of rural tourism include heritage, farm, pilgrim, adventure and nature. In Slovenia, the most important form of rural tourism is tourism on family farms. In Netherlands, the rural tourist product means especially camping on the farm and being linked to route-bound activities as cycling, walking or horse riding. In Greece, the main provision of rural tourism product is bed and breakfast with accommodation in traditionally furnished rooms and with traditional breakfasts often based on homemade products (Rátz, & Puczkó, 1998).

Rural Tourism in India

The form in which rural tourism is now taking shape can be traced to an International Conference and Exhibition on Rural Tourism in India organised by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in association with the Udaipur Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Udaipur (Rajasthan) in 2001¹. The basic concept of rural tourism was envisaged with benefit accruing to local community through entrepreneurial opportunities, income generation, employment opportunities, conservation and development of rural arts and crafts, investment for infrastructure development and preservation of the environment and heritage. Early movers in adopting the concept of developing and promoting rural tourism have been Rajasthan and Kerala². The outcome of this workshop was a collaborative effort by the Union Ministries of Tourism & Culture, Rural Development, Other Nodal Agencies and FICCI to plan a 10-year project to market and develop the concept of Rural Tourism in India. A survey commissioned to A F Ferguson for the study for the above project estimated that every one million additional visitors to the country could translate into Rs 4300-cr of revenue for the industry. Besides, every one million of additional investment into the tourism sector has the potential of generating 47.5 jobs. And every direct job leads to the creation of another 11 indirect jobs³.

With the figures in hand the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) in its National Tourism Policy, 2002 announced that 'Village tourism will be promoted as the primary tourism product of India to spread tourism and its socio-economic benefits to rural areas'. Direct fallout of this was the Endogenous tourism project between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of Tourism in 2003. The project focus under the 'Sustainable Livelihood' thematic area will be "to initiate and build upon a number of community level initiatives to address issues of poverty, through group mobilisation around income-generation activities buttressed by skill endowment and credit/ resource support issues" (UNDP, 2003). The 5 broad objectives of this initiative are to build capacity at the local level, experiment with location-specific models of community tourism enterprise, build strong community-private partnerships, support innovative and promising rural tourism initiatives and provide inputs to national and state tourism policy. The project has identified 31 sites in 20 states and has allocated Rs 50 lakh per site for tourism development works⁴.

In an effort to further build on the concept the Ministry of Tourism identified another 55 sites. Government of India has thus come forward with a scheme under which financial assistance would be extended upto Rs.50 lakhs for promoting rural tourism in one centre. The permissible activities under the scheme are improvement of surroundings, roads, illumination, sewerage, wayside amenities, refurbishment of monuments and signage etc.

The recognition of rural tourism as an alternative to mainstream is a recent concept. The government (at centre, state, local level), the tourism industry as well as groups/ organisations on the ground are putting in concerted efforts to see that these models of community-based tourism finds success. However, caution must be heeded in relation to the impacts that this may have on the environment and the people of the region, and therefore to fore-plan the negation / minimisation of the negative impacts.

Summary of Impacts of Tourism in/on Rural Areas

As already illustrated in the previous sections, recreation and tourism activities in a number of rural settings have been dramatically transformed from being relatively passive and minor elements of the landscape to becoming active and significant agents of economic, environmental and social change. With this shift from a passive to active role, there have been transformational changes in rural areas, both positive and negative. At this point it should be noted that tourism can contribute positively to a place if sustained planning and action is constantly under the watchful eye of the policy-makers at the local, regional and national level. The positive and negative impacts have been divided under broad heads: socio-economic, cultural and physical environment.

Socio-economic	Cultural	Physical: Built and natural
Positive		
Provide source of new, alternative or supplementary income and employment	Reinvigorate local culture	Contribution to conservation and protection
Help reduce gender and other social power imbalances	Instil sense of local pride, self-esteem and identity	Supports the preservation and improvement of the historic built environment
Encourage collective community activity		Environmental improvements in rural towns and villages such as litter disposal
Provide opportunities for retaining population in areas that might otherwise experience depopulation		
Regional balance / development		
Overall multiplier effects, although in rural areas these tend to be lower		
Negative		
Economic leakages	Manufacture or distort local culture for commodification and staged authenticity	Habitat destruction
Demonstration effect	Destroy indigenous culture	Littering, emissions and other forms of pollution
Local price inflation		Congestion
Distort local employment structure		New construction sprawl, perhaps grafted on to existing settlements
Distort local housing market		
Reduction in local services (replacement of traditional shops with restaurants or souvenir shops)		
Reinforce perception of women's employment as low		

paid and part-time and an extension of the 'domestic role'		
Self-contained complexes with tenuous links to local economy		
Seasonal patterns of demand		
Incurs developmental costs for maintaining and protecting the environment, attractions, infrastructural facilities		

Source: Roberts & Hall, 2001

Sustainable Rural Tourism

The World Tourism Organisation notes that within the next 5-10 years the range of products on offers to tourists seeking the rural experience is to increase significantly. There is a clear trend in the growth of rural tourism with the increase in the numbers of tourists visiting these places (World Tourism Organisation, 1999). In the previous section we have seen the repercussions that these demands have and will make on fragile environments. These impacts for a long time have not been given its due recognition as rural tourism is often taken to be synonymous with alternative tourism and the notion that alternative tourism is embedded by sustainable practices.

Sustainable development has been in existence and practiced since time immemorial. However the concept of sustainability as it is understood today was first defined in the Brundtland Report, 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development, as

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"

(Williams, 1998)

Though the Brundtland report made no special reference to tourism, the role of tourism in the process of continuously misusing the Earth's resources has been analysed and the concept of sustainable tourism appeared (Rátz & Puczkó, 1998). Various international conventions/ organisations (CBD, CSD, WTO-OMT, WTTC) since then have highlighted the importance of sustainable tourism. Essentially, the basis of sustainable tourism development is recognition of the relationship that exists between the three components of the tourism-operating environment, the destination environment and the host community and how to find a balanced approach amongst the three (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997).

It is this ideal balance that is sought by most planners. The need of the hour is to align rural tourism under the broad ambit of sustainable development. The reasons as explained by Lane (1994)

"Visitors to the countryside are increasingly mobile and are able to penetrate more remote areas than just a few years ago. Advances in modes of transport have assisted this, coupled with the increasingly sophisticated marketing of new destinations. Outsiders who have little understanding of the people, culture and heritage of that area may manage rural tourism. While realizing a need to stimulate some rural economies, reliance on tourism may lead to an unbalanced economy".

(Thomson Learning)

However, information on the principles of sustainable rural tourism still remains elusive. Efforts have been made by a few countries to answer this question; United Kingdom has published advisory booklets on the Development of Sustainable Rural Tourism and Working for the Countryside: A strategy for rural tourism in England (2001-2005), while India, Korea and others have incorporated this element into their national policies. As there is no clear direction on this subject, each country trying to mesh this ideology into its national policies.

Conclusion

It is clear that rural areas are an integral part of the modern tourism experience. I would like to conclude this paper by an important seminar that was organised by the World Tourism Organisation held at Belgrade in 2002 on Rural Tourism. The participants at the end shared a vision for rural tourism, which was based on the following principles (Cabrini, 2002):

- Alternative to Mass Market Tourism

- Sustainable Development
- Common Planning Strategy – Public/Private Partnerships
- Harmonisation of standards
- Balance between 'Push and Pull' Forces
- Role of key groups in society

This document was to serve as a guide and forerunner, but turned out to be extremely narrow in focus. I believe it is problematic to equate rural tourism with alternative tourism, as the latter itself has not been defined in clear terms. Also they (participants) believe that rural tourism is unlikely to suffer from the disadvantages associated with mass tourism destinations. Rural areas as illustrated earlier suffer from problems that are as grave as the ones suffered in mass tourism destinations. They speak of adopting sustainable development principles only to achieve economic stability, which again is flawed in its approach. Even the point on the role of key groups in the societies is addressed only from the viewpoint of employment generation. Nowhere does it take into account the voice of the people who may be socially and culturally impacted by the development of rural tourism in the region. This vision document has got itself of a wrong footing and therefore what they hope to achieve as a vision seems a distant reality.

It is a fact that in reality many forms of rural tourism are unable to conform to the guidelines of sustainable development. However with timely, accurate research and dissemination of information, proper planning, implementation and monitoring of policies as well as working towards strengthening of institutions will contribute towards the processes of achieving the principles and values of sustainable tourism in rural areas.

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End Notes

- 1 FICCI to host conference on rural tourism, Business Line, Bangalore, 11th July 2001
- 2 Tap rural India's tourism potential, says FICCI, Richa Mishra, Business Line, New Delhi 26th July 2001
- 3 Let's go rural, Preeti Mehra, Business Line, Bangalore, 24th September 2001
- 4 Rural Tourism: It's a Niche That India Can Offer, Ashok B. Sharma, Financial Express, Bangalore, 23rd August 2004

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